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ABSTRACT:

**Verdi's Ternary Structures in Les Vêpres siciliennes**

James Hepokoski

In previous studies I have suggested that one of Verdi's most telling abilities—particularly evident in the mid-century works—was that of harnessing the expressive power of genres and intermixing their connotations. Those earlier studies focused on the generic (and social) implications of the two types of melodic structure that most engaged the composer in the years from 1840 to 1853; variants of the Italian lyric-form patterns (aa'ba" or aa'bc, the most typical Verdian designs) and of the patterns associated with French strophic song (verse/refrain-space). One may notice, however, that as we move through the operas of the late 1840s and early 1850s it is only in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855, for Paris) that at least one new generic element is finally and decisively added to the mix: grand ternary form (ABA, marked by a textual reprise). Even though there are one or two scattered Verdian precedents (the most important of which occurs in *La battaglia di Legnano* from 1849), it is only in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* that Verdi began to have frequent and emphatic recourse to these ternary structures—a design apparently associated at this time with French grand opera.

An examination of the two most obvious "French" ternary melodies in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* shows that they have been generically mixed with other melodic types: Montfort's "Au sein de la puissance" is a grand or "full" ternary structure in which each A section—a separate, extended melodic unit in itself—is articulated in the manner of a single stanza of a strophic song; Procida's "Et toi, Palerme" is a smaller, "compressed" ternary structure (in effect, aa'baa', with textual reprise) closely related to lyric form. The hypothesis of this paper is that the various melodic types encountered in Verdi around 1855 may be generally ordered into an overlapping hierarchy and social connotations ranging from socially "high" to "low" as follows: full ternary; compressed ternary; lyric form; strophic song. To be sure, such a schema requires caution and careful nuancing, but even so it is possible to use it to suggest ways in which Verdi might have blended these connotations for dramatic purposes in the ternary melodies in *Vêpres*.